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IRREGULARITIES IN VERSE

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In the desire to reduce poetics to a science, there has been an undue emphasis upon the regularities of verse and a neglect of the irregularities. One could read a score of books upon versification almost without suspecting that there is such a thing as conflict or variation under the laws, and that it is in this very conflict or variation from the norm that a large part of the charm in verse lies. Writers upon poetics from Coventry Patmore to Professor Charlton M. Lewis have touched upon this side of metrics, and Professor Lewis has done a good deal more; but even he has not carried the matter so far as it will go, nor has he, nor anyone, pointed out the complete importance of it or its wider relationships.

The following paper does not in any sense pretend to be exhaustive; but it tries to indicate the more important points involved and their large significance.

From one point of view the whole aim of art is to impose a little order upon the apparent chaos of all this unintelligible world. From the incoherent experiences of life, the story-teller selects and gives to incidents a pattern which the multiplicity of real life does not have. The slovenly speech of every day becomes a more or less regular prose, moving forward with some sort of rhythmic tread from somewhere to somewhere. The story in prose is like that wonderful bivouac of the immortal poets in Dante, whose light conquers, no matter how feebly, its little hemisphere of darkness. When the prose becomes verse, and the narrative, epic, the light of order grows. Selection of experience becomes much more rigorous, and the speech of every day is used with exacting care; loose rhythms take on the regular beat of meter, and thought becomes gilded with the glint of rhyme and bound by the stern limits of line and stanza. The grip of order has closed upon the inconsequential matter of experience, and harder, if possible, upon daily

speech. The more firmly the material has been controlled by the laws of selection, rhythm, and meter, the more the product has risen in art value. So poetry is the highest of the lingual arts.

Were we dealing here with the laws of so-called "inanimate" nature, with the laws of heat or sound, they would have to be emended to meet exceptions. Elastic laws are unknown in natural science. But in poetry, as in all other arts, we are dealing not with "natural" or "scientific" facts, but with human. Here laws are flexible; "generally speaking," "other things being equal," "approximately" are necessary qualifications. Thus, for example, rhythm is defined as "the recurrence of similar phenomena at regular intervals of time."¹ This reads like a scientific definition; but apply it with precision, and nothing but a clock or an engine could be called rhythmical—even the beating of the human heart or human speech would be unrhythmical.

But the "approximate regularity" of the law of rhythm does not annihilate regularity. The modification does not mean chaos; the law still holds "approximately." And the important fact is that this flexibility of the law actually makes its manifestations delightful. It is as if the mind greeted with the enthusiasm of kinship the humanizing touch in what would otherwise be unhuman or mechanical.

A line of poetry is, of course, theoretically divided into a certain number of equal, or nearly equal, time intervals which are measured off, or separated from one another, by stresses or accents. Thus in any given line of verse, as, for example, the opening of Gray's "Elegy," there are five time intervals, each with one stress,

The cúrfew tólls | the knéll | of párt|ing dáy.

Of course the "Elegy" is in iambic pentameter.

The measure struck in the first line continues throughout. Indeed, we expect after hearing a few feet that iamb will follow iamb with regularity; and soon, that line will follow line, and stanza, stanza, so that we have in our ears a sort of skeleton rhythm or plan, which so long as we read the poem controls us and it. It is as masterful and definite as the insistent one, two, three of a waltz which may run on in our heads long after the melody has

¹ Lewis, *Principles of English Verse*, p. 2.

stopped. Iambic foot, pentameter line, four-line stanza, alternating rhyme—these together make up the metrical scheme of the poem. It is the embodiment of order, the system which has made of Gray's thoughts and of his words a lovely pattern of formal design.

Yet as one reads over the first stanza of the "Elegy," one finds that the time intervals are not equal. I instinctively dwell longer upon "tolls" and "knell" than upon "day" and, perhaps, "part-(ing)," so that the second and third feet are longer in duration than the first, the fourth, and the fifth; and in the second line, the third foot is very decidedly longer in utterance than any of the others—"winds slow(ly)" occupies obviously more time than the following "(slow)ly o'er."

— —	— —slow— —	— —slow— —	— —	— —
The cur-	few tolls	the knell	of part-	ing day,
— —	— —	— —slow— —	— —	— —
The low-	ing herd	winds slow-	ly o'er	the lea.

I am not going to venture to attempt to differentiate accurately the time length of the other feet in the stanza. I am sure, however, that a discriminating reader would vary the time length of almost every foot; but nothing is harder to test and measure, and the point is made if I have indicated that one does make some difference in the length of feet almost unconsciously. The time intervals vary because the variation helps to express the underlying thought, and also because the variation gives the ear a certain degree of pleasure.

In the preceding paragraph we have been concerned with nothing but the time intervals of the feet, or rather, the time intervals between the stresses. Such time intervals are very variable, depending largely upon the meaning of the line. We read fast or slow as the thought suggests to our minds rapidity or slowness of motion. This influence upon tempo, to use a musical term, is not the same in all persons, but it is greater generally than is usually admitted. Metricists are too apt to claim that certain moods are inevitably connected with certain measures. Thus, for example, the six-syllable iambic is sometimes said to be always mournful. But experience leads one to wise qualification. The chances are strongly in favor of a measure being grave or gay according to the thought put into it, rather than because of some predetermination

of character. Certainly in any given poem a line hurries or slows up as the thought demands. Thus in the "Elegy" the line

Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
trips more blithely, is read actually more quickly, than
Slow through the churchyard path we saw him borne.

The theoretic length of line is the same in each case, the arrangement of feet is the same. The chief difference is that the one expresses haste, the other deliberation, and the time intervals in the second line are longer than in the first. The same metrical scheme prevails throughout the poem, but that scheme in the matter of time intervals, in other words, of speed, is elastic, and we find that the regularity of rhythm is very "approximate" indeed.

So much for the time length of the foot. But rhythm has to be measured off by the stresses or "accents." Now, according to that metrical scheme, which underlies this same "Elegy," there are five feet of equal length—we have found how variable is that equality—and five stresses of equal weight. Is there variation here also?

Certainly no one could read those opening lines as if to the regular tap of a pencil with equal emphasis on each of the five stressed syllables. It is easy to recognize the fact and yet hard to note the results when one reads the lines naturally. Indeed, I am far from sure of the relative emphasis of all five stresses in any one of the lines; but I am sure that they are not all equal—not entirely sure that they are not all unequal. For convenience, let me mark the stressed syllables 1, 2, and 3 according to their relative weight, leaving out of account the technically unstressed syllables.

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea.

The reader will probably object to this classification of stresses; I very probably shall agree with him. But the point is not accuracy of notation, but the recognition of the extraordinary variation we admit in reading a line of poetry from the theoretic metrical scheme which underlies the piece. And there is another point, that it is the meaning of the line which controls the variations in stress and

forces us to interpret liberally the rhythmical regularity with which we start.

Theoretically, again, the unstressed syllables, which fill the gaps between the stressed, are all alike in their inconsequence. But actually they are unequal. For example, in the second line there is a theoretically unaccented word, "winds." Of course it rebels against its inglorious position, and, to my ear, receives more stress—in spite of scheme—than the supposedly emphatic "o'er"—"winds slowly ó'er the léa." This kind of rebellion is more often met with in more modern and freer poetry, but that it appears at all in this elegy of the eighteenth century with its keen feeling for regularity and convention makes the variation only the more striking.

Again, each line of poetry—certainly each line of more than four feet—has for ease of utterance at least one pause, the caesura. Each measure has its own particular point where the metrical flow naturally stops for a second of time. In the "Elegy," for instance, that moment of pause occurs after the second foot, the point where it is easiest to stop if one were chanting the lines in mere sing-song without regard to sense. But it is not the formal scheme, as we are beginning to discover, which has its way. In the constant struggle which goes on between form and sense, the sense at least partly wins out; and in any good verse the grand pause or pauses shift now forward now backward as the mood or the poet wills.

And, once more, since we are sharpening our ears for all the pauses of verse, there are those less obvious sorts which are in the mouths of some readers not pauses at all, but mere "holds," to use the musical term—those suspensions which are not important enough to be called caesural, but yet sufficient to separate word or thought groups from each other and so to "phrase" the lines. In music, phrasing binds together certain related notes by smooth transition from one to the other, and at the same time it separates by momentary pause or suspension groups of notes from one another, so that a passage takes on a clean-cut meaning. The same thing holds in poetry, and in prose, too, intelligently read. Words are not spoken individually, but in groups, and these groups are separated from each other to bring out clearly their relations.

Such phrasing, then, is present in any line with its twofold function of binding and separating, often pushing the caesural pause to one side, often ignoring pauses at the end of lines, often introducing slight pauses or suspensions almost too slight to be recorded, yet none the less real. They play about the schematic meter, never destroying it, but giving it life.

A rather clumsy attempt to indicate the placing of these pauses in that first stanza follows: in which the caesural pauses are marked by a double line, and the phrase pause by a single:

The curfew || tolls the knell | of parting day,
 The lowing herd || winds slowly | o'er the lea,
 The ploughman || homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world | to darkness || and to me.

In the first line the theoretic caesura falls after "tolls"; but one unwillingly divides the predicate so. Instinct and the meaning force us to put the grand pause after "curfew"—it falls here in the middle of a foot—and making "tolls the knell" into a group, just slightly hints its separation from "of parting day." Similarly, with the other lines. Such interpretation is largely personal; but every careful reader will introduce of necessity some such pauses and phrasing. We have, then, still another way in which the meaning plays with, and about, the metrical scheme.

But we have not even yet exhausted the infractions of the metrical canons of the line. Iambic pentameter is the measure, each foot consisting of one stressed and one unstressed syllable. But now and then to show independence the meter substitutes a trochaic for an iambic foot. In such a line as

Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,

or

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,

the stress comes on the first syllable of the line. Such variations are rare exceptions in the "Elegy," far more frequent elsewhere, but they are deliberate. Gray might as well have written

And muttering wayward fancies he would rove,

and so have been regular. But he preferred to set the pronunciation of a word at odds with the iambic measure. Similarly in the second line cited, he deliberately takes a striking phrase and

by setting it into an iambic line lets the line take the consequences. To be sure, one may scan the line, as the metricists do, with the stress of the first foot upon the "from." But no one ever emphasized the "from" in Mr. Hardy's title, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, nor does one here. The line frankly begins with the stressed monosyllable, and so substitutes a trochee for an iamb as the first foot. Here is variation again; again conflict between sense and scheme, and the sense wins out delightfully.

And then the two-syllable iambic foot may have an extra light syllable thrown in, so that it becomes an anapaest, as in the phrase

To quénch the blúshes óf ingénuous shame.

You may prefer to try to keep this foot—"(*ingen*)uous *shá*me"—an iamb by running the two light syllables together into one, or nearly one, or you may take pleasure in the deliberate introduction of an extra syllable; but in any case there is elasticity, variation.

The possible variations are becoming confusing, not to say wearisome, but the end is in sight, though not here. For there is the liberty which may be taken with the line length. It may have a syllable added or taken away. There is no example in the "Elegy" of a line of less than ten syllables, but there are a couple of lines of eleven, if we may read "tower" and "bower" as disyllabic. Then there is the occasional example of the thought overflowing the line unit and spilling over—the run-on line; as where Gray writes

nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues.

Rarer still there is the spilling-over of the stanza, as

Th' applause of listening senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their history in a nation's eyes,
Their lot forbad.

Then there is the rhyme, which is regularly faultless, but which now and then becomes merely approximate. Even Gray, the careful and conservative, permits the rhyme of "toil" and "smile" conventionally accepted in the eighteenth century, and such eye-rhymes as "withstood," "blood," and "rove," "love."

In all these many ways—in meter, foot, stress, pause, line, rhyme, stanza—the classic Gray, like all English poets, admits variations from the metrical scheme; in all these many ways the verse is elastic and alive. Is there anything left of the regular? Have we not reached poetic anarchy where variation is all and rule is nothing?

Rules still prevail, for they are human rules and rules of art. A careful summary of results leaves us certain that in spite of an occasional run-on stanza, most of the stanzas are complete in themselves; that in spite of run-on lines and lines with eleven syllables here and there, most of the lines are not run-on and contain the orthodox number of syllables; that in spite of free rhymes, most are faultless; that in spite of trochaic or anapaestic substitutions, most of the feet are iambic. There is, to be sure, far more freedom of variation in the matter of pauses, in the time length of feet, in emphasis of stressed and unstressed syllables; but even so, there is no shock to the ear, and never for a moment do we forget the metrical scheme of the poem as a whole. The rhythm sways to and fro, but it is not destroyed. Indeed, this elasticity and freedom actually emphasize the underlying rhythm. Perfect regularity would mean monotony, and monotony destroys attention. The very variations keep the mind alert and appreciative of the rhythm which is so strong that it can afford to give way here and there, and rejoice in the unexpectedness of pause and stress.

A thoroughgoing treatise would dwell at some length upon the relative importance of variations, upon the practice of poets in using conflict for poetic effect. It would seek to answer the question of how different schools of poetry have variously indulged in the different kinds of conflict; how some have stood more firmly by the regularity of scheme, and some have carried freedom almost to the point of license; how, even within the same school, different poets have given rein to their individuality and have found expression in the greater or less infraction of the norm; how different kinds of poetry from their very nature and purpose, and different measures from an innate something belonging to them, differ in the degree in which conflict is practiced. Close analysis might, moreover, point out the actual effects produced by certain vari-

ations, and their relative value for expressing certain moods. In other words, a thoroughgoing treatise might well, after establishing in all its ramifications the reality and importance of conflict, proceed to historical or an aesthetic examination of its use in literature. But the purpose of this paper is merely to call attention once more to the fundamental idea, and to suggest, rather than to prove, its far-reaching importance in the world of poetry and art.

No person who has ears to hear can doubt the satisfaction which this conflict in verse brings with it; and yet the fact that similar conflict is the source of pleasure in the other arts gives reassurance that the principle is broadly based.

Most obviously, music exhibits a similarity to poetry in this matter of conflict—with its theoretic time scheme, indicated more formally than in poetry by the initial $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{6}{8}$ written on the staff; with its carefully indicated tempo, *andante* or *allegro*, often made precise by the definite number of beats per minute, noted for metronomic verification; with the natural rhythm which tends inevitably to emphasize certain notes in the measure. In short, the mechanical features are all deliberately fixed in advance. Yet the composer himself is not content to rest there. He marks passages *ritardando*, *accelerando*, *piano*, *forte*; he indicates stresses often at variance with the chosen beat. We thus have syncopation where the unexpected note is emphasized; we have phrasing in which the flow of melody runs counter to the measure and the beat; we have the rhythm of one voice against that of another, as where four notes run against three or five; we have strange modulation or progression in modern music whose piquancy and charm are due to the fact that they go counter to what we have always regarded as conventionally fixed; and we have many another variation unknown to poetry, made possible by the endless opportunities of the simultaneous sounding of many parts or voices. In music as in poetry, moreover, certain kinds tend to indulge in bolder and more frequent conflicts; the modern being much freer in form than that of ages more given to orderly expression.

Or turn to painting where the comparison with poetry becomes obviously more difficult. Conflict is present here also. Less formal in its development than either poetry or music, it relies less

upon the freedom from law for its effects. Painting is a spatial, not a temporal art, and the opportunities of conflict are reduced to spatial relations. And yet in the spatial relations the picture must have order, composition. The balance, the emphasis, which is necessary in any satisfactory painting, springs from the fundamental demand of formal and sane grouping of naturally unrelated facts or objects. Thus in painting we have at one end the formal balance of design which we see in the primitive Italian Madonna with the Virgin and Child sitting primly in the middle, and carefully placed angels and saints on either side, and on the other the free modern picture in which balance is so concealed that it is hardly recognized except in so far as it is unconsciously felt to be adequate. But through all the range of painting, in the hands of all the great painters, composition, the formal balancing of object, color, line, and shadow against object, color, line, and shadow is felt as much in its way as the iambic pentameter is felt in the organ music of Milton's blank verse; and the freedom which acknowledges and yet transcends the formal pattern is a source of pleasure in the carefully composed picture as well as in music or poetry itself.

The same sort of conflict is likewise found and felt in sculpture and architecture. Spatial like painting, they have even less opportunity to show variation in devious ways. And yet architecture, especially, now and again makes bold use of freedom in transcending formal balance and gains delightful effects by skilful variation in placing masses, color, line, and shadow. Sculpture and architecture both, then, fall in with the other arts in deriving joy from the free and playful obedience to elastic laws.

Thus we may end as we began, only, let us hope, with a keener appreciation of what this conflict means. Order is, indeed, heaven's first law; it is the prerequisite of all art, whether temporal or spatial; but it is only when the formality of order is transcended, and the law is, as it were, humanized, that we reach the highest in poetry, music, and the other arts.